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SUBJECT: Counternarcotics Efforts in Vietnam's NW Highlands

Reftel: 04 Hanoi 1584

1. (SBU) Summary: Lao Cai is a significant transportation route for narcotics between Vietnam and China, Provincial Counternarcotics Police Director Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Xuan Ngoai told the Ambassador on April 23. His unit, which receives some USG funding routed through the United Nations Office of Drug Control (UNODC) (reftel), has increased its quantity of drugs seized, but is not able to disrupt the rising flow of narcotics. The province has been effective in countering poppy cultivation. Lao Cai's success rate in treating narcotics users is only two to three percent, and the province seeks international advice on how to improve this. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Lao Cai Provincial Counternarcotics Police Director Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Xuan Ngoai told the Ambassador on April 23 that the province is susceptible to narcotics traffickers who exploit its long and open border with China, as well as its two border gates and rail and waterway connections. The province has been designated by the Central Government as a "center of narcotics trafficking and consumption," which allows for special assistance for its efforts to deal with narcotics smuggling and use.

3. (SBU) Lao Cai's counternarcotics efforts are controlled through an interagency task force that includes police, customs and border guard officers. There are a total of 65 police officers dedicated to narcotics interdiction and another 13 in the counternarcotics section of the border police. The police have 15 officers specifically trained in drug interdiction efforts through programs in Hanoi and in France. The Lao Cai police also cooperate with their counterparts across the border in China's Yunnan Province. In 2004 and 2005, the Lao Cai police made 172 drug-related arrests in 143 different cases, seizing 3.2 kg of heroin, 8.4 kg of opium and 750 packets of assorted narcotics.

4. (SBU) Lao Cai has three treatment centers and 2,367 officially registered drug users, although officials recognize the actual number is likely higher. About 60 percent of addicts are ethnic minorities, who have a tradition of small-scale opium production for personal use, while 40 percent are addicts living in urban areas. Opium has been the most widely used drug in the province, but heroin use is increasing rapidly. To deal with drug consumption, authorities have focused on education, poppy eradication and treatment for drug users. Eradication efforts have combined public awareness campaigns with a program to provide seedlings of new crops and animals as replacements for poppy cultivation. As a result, poppy cultivation has ceased in Lao Cai, Ngoai claimed.

5. (SBU) To treat addicts, Lao Cai has three centers, one of which receives some support from a United Nations project. In 2004, the province processed 440 drug users in these centers. Treatment programs run for 12 months. Lieutenant Colonel Ngoai estimated that the success rate for treatment is two to three percent, and said that, more than any other area, he needed international support and advice in improving drug treatment. (Ngoai defined "success" as refraining from drug use for at least 12 months.)

6. (SBU) Despite the province's efforts, Ngoai predicts that drug shipments will continue to rise in the region. He noted that while the police are dealing with fewer cases than in the past, the total quantities they have seized are increasing. Further, the number of drug users in the province is increasing, and the police have not been able to effectively disrupt drug trafficking rings.

7. (SBU) Provincial leaders from the Northwest Highlands provinces of Dien Bien, Lai Chau and Lao Cai also provided some perspective to the Ambassador on narcotics production, shipment and use. In Dien Bien, the People's Committee Vice Chairman claimed that programs to deal with poppy cultivation have resulted in the crop's being eradicated in the province. The province has "aided" farmers in switching to growing corn instead. Lai Chau provincial officials characterized the major narcotics shipment route in the region as being between Laos and Dien Bien Province. Lai Chau has a single narcotics treatment center that gives

addicts a two-week program and can help place them in special employment programs. The People's Committee Chairman of Lao Cai Province noted that the region's long and porous borders made countering trafficking in narcotics difficult, and that foreign support in this area is welcome.

MARINE